Ethnic Belarusians under the Polish Rule: 1934–1937 Survey of West Belarus

BY
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Mikolaj Iwanow, ed.
Seweryn Wysłouch, Stosunki narodowościowe na terenie województw wschodnich [Wilno 1939/40] Wydawnictwo: Studium Europy Wschodniej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw, 2013, 303 pp.
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Many politicians and commentators explain today's Belarusians' lack of interest in their national language and culture by Soviet policies. They claim it was the Communist regime which made this European nation forget its roots. A newly published report prepared in the inter-war period for the Polish authorities – which ruled the western part of today's Belarus between the two World Wars – undermines such theories.

The report of Seweryn Wysłouch documents in great detail that the regions with a proven ethnic Belarusian population – which until the Second World War were spared from Communist rule – had few signs of Belarusian cultural, and even less political, activity, and in particular none linked to the Communist or Socialist movements. In other words, there was almost no Belarusian life for the Soviets to crush in 1939.

In the 1930s, Wysłouch carried out this unique fieldwork analysis of the situation in West Belarus under Polish administration in the 1930s. He served the Polish government, yet due to his job – he analysed ethnic problems and advised the Polish state on them – he was interested in 'finding Belarusians,' not in downplaying the Belarusian movement.

That proved quite a challenge. Thus, he tried hard to explain where one million Belarusians had disappeared to, their numbers having diminished between the two

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censuses of 1921 and 1931. Wysłouch almost succeeded in explaining how the biases of state officials responsible for the censuses led to this dramatic decline. Almost, because on the following pages the researcher had to describe a new serious decline – this time after 1931 – in the number of those who identified themselves, directly or through language, as Belarusians. For instance, in villages where the 1931 census had registered more than 100 persons speaking Belarusian, the 1937 survey found a 'completely Polish population with strong national [*Polish – SB*] identity'. That meant approaching the silent final solution to the Belarusian question in Poland. The book provides numerous such cases with detailed description of the situation on the ground.

Almost eight decades after it was written, another Polish scholar called Mikolaj Iwanow has edited and prepared the research paper from the 1930s. The book has recently been published by Warsaw University. Wysłouch, known inter alia for his studies of inter-ethnic relations and the Soviet Union which he pursued in Viĺnia before the Second World War, in 1934–37 prepared and conducted with the help of numerous assistants a large-scale sociological survey of the Belarusian regions of inter-war Poland. They carried out research into 10 districts, covering about 100,000 inhabitants of 264 different settlements. The study focused on Christian populations of all denominations, leaving out Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of these lands.

As a result, Wysłouch was able to present a detailed picture of West Belarusian society to the Polish government, which ordered and funded the enterprise. He printed two volumes on separate aspects of the situation before the war, and now the final volume, which deals with the general situation, has been published.

The final volume includes a general introduction to the problem of inter-ethnic relations against the backdrop of censuses conducted in Poland in 1921 and 1931. These showed a catastrophic decline in the number of Belarusians, who at the first glance appeared to be a minority in West Belarus. Then follows a section, which describing peculiarities of the national identity displayed by inhabitants of these lands.

The rest of the book – 11 sections – is dedicated to separate aspects of the situation. Among them are descriptions and analyses of the rural intelligentsia, Belarusian and Polish organisations in the village, the Polish cooperative movement in the village, schools, education outside the schools, teachers, the local administration, territorial self-government and the readership of print media. Unique information is collected in the annex – almost forty pages of statistics dating from 1935 on the ethnic composition of the population in different districts combined with data on subscriptions to different Polish, Belarusian and Russian-language media of inter-war Poland.

As is evident from this list of themes, the text of Wysłouch himself contains some inconsistencies and omissions. One encounters repetitions, finds no real conclusions (in the preface), gets confused by the list of the communities surveyed and in vain looks for some maps. The author had only limited opportunities to finish processing the results of the survey for the last volume, given the harsh conditions of 1939–1940. Hence the book shall be judged with this disclaimer in mind. It is a half-finished compilation of notes.

The editor of the volume, Wroclaw University professor Mikolaj Iwanow, undertook a large amount of work to prepare Wysłouch's text, explanations and comments on the original. Unfortunately, the introduction remained limited to a discussion of the general characteristics of the author and his study. At the same time, the introduction suffers from an uncritical approach to this Polish scholar of the interwar period and the general situation of Belarusians and their lands in the pre-1939 Polish state. The additional texts by Jan Malicki, Danuta Malicka and Zenon Wysłouch which are also included in the book do not fill this serious void either.

In the introduction, Iwanow argues that Wysłouch deserves the title of founder of Belarusian studies in Poland. Indeed, he wrote on Belarusian issues in interwar Poland, publishing in particular a book on the Communist party of Western Belarus. But Wysłouch was not simply a scholar. He was – as the editor admits although without analysing the fact – mostly closely engaged in the working of the Polish state. Moreover, he worked in an institution partly funded and staffed by the Ministry of Military Affairs. This means that his studies of inter-ethnic relations were not just of academic interest but took place in the context of colonial practices of the interwar Polish government.

Meanwhile, Iwanow describes Wysłouch as a person sympathetic to Belarusians and puts forth the thesis that the survey, the results of which the former has edited and published, indicate the then Polish government's interest in reviewing in the second half of the 1930s its policies with regard to minorities, including Belarusians. Both of these propositions remain unsubstantiated.

Wysłouch's apparent sympathy for Belarusians merely resulted in his wish to ensure the more effective incorporation of West Belarusians into the structure of the contemporary Polish state by using more widely non-violent means. Needless to say, the Viĺnia scholar saw no need for autonomy of the Belarusian lands. There is an interesting parallel in this regard in the life of Wyslouch himself. After the Second World War he immediately found a job with the Polish Communist government and again worked on the question of incorporation of newly acquired lands into Poland. Only this time he dealt with former German lands on the western borders of Poland.

Hence, even though the nationalistic Warsaw government ordered Wysłouch in the 1930s to carry out such a survey, it did not count for much. The right-wing researcher with links to the security apparatus was asked to look into the situation. And the situation did not look too catastrophic for the Polish government at the time and did not require radical changes. After all, by the mid-1930s Warsaw had succeeded in suppressing the Belarusian movement which survived mostly only in the form of left-wing organisations. Therefore, the thesis that the survey should be considered a sign of intended serious changes in Warsaw policies in West Belarus still lacks any proof.

Thus, the most crucial questions arising from the otherwise excellent publication – that is, the place of Wysłouch and his survey in the context of the time and state policies – remain without answer. At the same time, the editor declares his interest in 'reviving historical truth', a claim which one finds today only in Eastern European historical publications. Today the 'search for truth' in mainstream Western publications is replaced with seeking interpretations and suggesting possible explanations.

At the same time, one does not have to look hard to find colourful biases in Wysłouch's text, e.g., as he emphasizes that '[the Belarusian population] realises the superiority of Polish culture'. Unfortunately, the editor chooses not to analyse these statements which clearly characterise the Wysłouch survey and text as a remarkable yet still integral part of the Polish government's policy at the time, even more – as an instrument of that policy aimed at the incorporation and colonisation of Western Belarusian lands and the Polonisation of its population.

On the contrary, Iwanow without any reservation announces that Wysłouch's report presents 'insightful and accurate analysis of developing ethnic processes on the territories of the inter-war Polish Republic'. That is odd to read of Wysłouch's text, given that it argues in the following style: 'The question which interests us above all is, whether and to what degree rural Belarusian activists are influenced by the ideals of Belarusian national revival. In other words, is the [...] opinion correct that every village intelligent or Belarusian activist is a Communist?'.

In any event, Iwanow's publication of Wysłouch's study can significantly contribute to our understanding of the history of the West Belarusian lands in the inter-war period. Yet the text of Wysłouch himself is far from being scholarly, even by the standards of his time. Back then it was a policy-oriented study intended for the use of state agencies. In other words, the survey can be compared in its functions and intentions to the Short Outline of the Belarusian Issue (*Krótki zarys zagadnienia białoruskiego)* published by the Polish General Staff in 1928, although Wysłouch's survey is focused on other themes and is much more sophisticated and comprehensive than the Outline.

Nowadays, Wysłouch's survey is a historical document expressing government policies. Therefore, it needs a critical study with application of modern research methodology to unveil biases, intentions and manipulations characteristic of the authoritarian and colonial policies of the Polish government in that period. There is very little of any of these approaches in the book published by Warsaw University.

Without such a critical study of this historical document, this text lends itself to be easily used for speculations with doubtful political implications. The publication presents a series of such speculations. Thus, the editor of the book claims to fight the previous historiography on the issue, defending the view that the Sanation-period Polish leaders 'were greatly concerned by this question [of national minorities] and were looking to repair these relations'. To present Wysłouch's survey as proof of that and ignore the consistent suppression of, say, Belarusian schools throughout the 1930s by the same leaders is an approach which fails to convince. The book, however, includes even bolder parallels with today's realities. For instance, it openly calls the current Belarus-Lithuanian border the 'Polish-Polish border'. All this makes Iwanow's otherwise very interesting publication a raw product, which lacks many attributes of modern scholarly publication.